

98-84331-27

London Society for
Women's Suffrage

Medical women on
women's suffrage

[London]

[1908]

98-84331-27

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MEDICAL WOMEN
ON
WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

In November, 1908, a Committee of Registered Medical Women of the United Kingdom, addressed the following letter to the Prime Minister:

TO THE RIGHT HON. H. H. ASQUITH, M.P.,
First Lord of the Treasury.

ASSOCIATION OF REGISTERED MEDICAL WOMEN.

London, November 2nd, 1908.

SIR,

On behalf of the women practitioners of Great Britain and Ireland, we venture to request you to consent to receive a deputation of Medical Women in favour of the extension of the Suffrage to women. When receiving a deputation of Members of Parliament in last May, on the same subject, you invited an expression of opinion from the women of the country. In response to this invitation, we have written to all the Registered Medical Women residing in the United Kingdom, asking whether or not they are in favour of Woman Suffrage. The results of this inquiry are as follows:—In favour, 538; against, 15. We venture to submit that these striking figures show that the practice of our profession, which gives an intimate knowledge of the conditions of life of all classes, leads to the conviction that the enfranchisement of women is essential to their well-being. We therefore ask for an opportunity to lay before you the facts which have come to our notice, and which we believe will enable us to present the subject to you from a somewhat different point of view from that of former deputations.

We are, Sir,

Your obedient servants,

ELIZABETH GARRETT ANDERSON, M.D. (Paris) L.S.A. (London),
Late Senior Physician to the New Hospital for Women.

SOPHIA JEX. BLAKE, M.D. (Berne) M.R.C.P.I.
Late Dean Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women and
Lecturer on Midwifery for the University of Edinburgh.

J. JULIA COCK, L.R.C.P.S.I., L.M., M.D. (Brux.)
Senior Physician New Hospital for Women, Dean, London
(Royal Free Hospital) School of Medicine for Women.

JANE H. WALKER, L.R.C.P.S., M.D. (Brux.)
Physician New Hospital for Women, Medical Superintendent
East Anglian Mortley's Farm Sanatoria, Suffolk.

MARY SCHARLIEB, M.D., M.S. (London)
Physician for the Diseases of Women, Royal Free Hospital.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE BOYD, L.R.C.P.S.I., M.D. (Brux.)
Senior Surgeon New Hospital for Women.

HELEN WEBB, M.B. (London)
Late Physician to Out-patients, New Hospital for Women.

F. MAY DICKINSON BERRY,
Assistant Medical Officer (Education) London County Council.

LOUISA BRANDRETH ALDRICH-BLAKE, M.D., M.S.
London University, Surgeon New Hospital for Women.

EMILY G. FLEMMING,
Physician to Children's O.P. Department, New Hospital for Women, Physician Medical Mission Hospital, Canning Town.

MAUD M. CHADBURN, M.D., B.S. (London)
Assistant Surgeon New Hospital for Women, and Surgeon Medical Mission Hospital, Canning Town.

MAY THORNE, F.R.C.S.I.,
President of the Association of Registered Medical Women.

L. GARRETT ANDERSON, M.D., B.S. (London)
Assistant Surgeon New Hospital for Women.

AGNES F. SAVILLE, M.A., M.D., M.R.C.P.
Assistant Physician St. John's Hospital for Diseases of the Skin.

FLORENCE E. WILEY, M.D., M.S., B.Sc. (London)
Assistant Physician for Diseases of Women, Royal Free Hospital.

FLORA MURRAY, M.D., B.S., D.P.H.
Assistant Anaesthetist Chelsea Hospital for Women.

A reply having been received to the effect that pressure of public business would prevent Mr. Asquith from receiving the Deputation, but that he would be glad to receive and consider any representations that might be made to him in writing, the following statement was presented:—

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE H. H. ASQUITH, M.P.

SIR, We write on behalf of the 538 Medical Women of the United Kingdom who have declared themselves in favour of the principle of Women's Suffrage. A list of their names is appended.

Many of the women in the medical profession, whom we represent, have been working for the franchise for years, and some have worked for forty years. We regard the question of Women's Suffrage as one of supreme importance, and we greatly regret that pressure of public business prevents you from receiving a deputation from Medical Women on this subject; but, in compliance with your invitation, we beg to submit for your consideration a written statement of the reasons which influence us, as medical practitioners, in asking to have the Parliamentary franchise extended to duly qualified women.

An unrepresented class has no easy way of expressing its views on public questions, and Medical Women suffer from political

helplessness, in the way that various classes of men have suffered, before they were enfranchised. Legislation not infrequently deals with matters which directly concern the duties and privileges of medical practitioners, and, as members of the medical profession, we desire to have the vote, in order to protect our own interests, and also to co-operate more effectually with the rest of the profession in advancing its general interests.

The question of the enfranchisement of women, directly or indirectly, affects all the women in Great Britain, but it is perhaps in the case of Medical Women that the anomaly of the present system of electing the nation's representatives can be most clearly shown. We are a body of taxpaying and self-supporting women, and we therefore afford a striking example of taxation without representation. In earning our living we necessarily encounter the same economic conditions as men, and we claim that we should have a voice in the regulation of these conditions.

We feel the injustice of being forced to pay taxes while we are deprived of representation in Parliament. The principle of "no taxation without representation" is the foundation of English liberty, and we feel that it is one on which we ought not to appeal to a Liberal Government in vain.

In addition to being taxpayers, we are all graduates of Universities or holders of diplomas of learned bodies. Since membership of a University is a qualification for the franchise, the exclusion of women from this privilege rests on an arbitrary decision which cannot be justified by any reasonable argument. The majority of our number, therefore, possess a double qualification for the exercise of the franchise, the property qualification, and the university graduates qualification. In addition to these claims which are shared by many classes of self-supporting and educated women, we would suggest others which appertain solely to Medical Women on account of their professional position.

Members of the medical profession are called upon to perform services to their fellows, of the most arduous, intimate and responsible nature. They advise men and women of all classes, upon matters of health and hygiene, personal conduct, social relations and the rearing of children. They are regarded as experts, of whose skilled services many persons and public bodies, as well as important departments of State, think fit to avail themselves. Women practitioners share in these duties and responsibilities, both public and private, their professional position, in all respects, being identical with that of men. The anomaly of our position is great, and it may be still further demonstrated, by the fact that while, as women, we are debarred from exercising the elementary right of citizenship, as doctors, we possess, in common with men, the legal power to sign certificates of insanity which deprive men of their right to vote.

In the course of our work, we come into contact with many classes of women, and we have special opportunities for realising

the disabilities which attach to their lives through lack of effective representation.

In hospital practice we observe the miserable condition of some of the women of the poorer classes. We see, at close quarters, the lives of the underpaid, the unemployed and the exploited, and also of the criminal, degenerate and intemperate, and we recognise that closely associated with the economic condition of woman's labour is the whole question of prostitution with its far-reaching attendant evils.

There are, at the present time, a number of laws on the Statute Book relating to public health and morals : others, which define the rights of parents in regard to the education, religion and guardianship of their children, which deal with marriage and divorce, with the housing of the poor, with the care of the feeble minded, with the question of intemperance, and with the regulation of female labour. Although these laws particularly affect women, yet while they are framed, women have no constitutional means of expressing an opinion on their wisdom and suitability.

We claim, for all women, that the women's point of view should be represented in the legislation of the country, and that Medical Women are specially qualified to assist in the solution of some of the problems with which these measures deal. We are convinced that the possession of the vote would exercise a stimulating effect upon women. Among those of education and leisure it would lead to an increased readiness to undertake work in branches of public service in which the co-operation of women is specially required, and among all classes a sense of responsibility and consciousness of citizenship would be fostered, which would tend to induce a study of and intelligent interest in matters affecting the community. Such a result would undoubtedly be of benefit to the State since the honour and welfare of the country are as dear to women as to men.

We are, etc.,

The signatures were appended of the following ladies, in addition to those who had signed the previous letter :—

ISABELLA MACDONALD, M.B. (London)

Physician to Out-patients, New Hospital for Women.

KATHERINE MAGUIRE, M.A., M.D.,

President of the Irish Association of Registered Medical Women.

KATHERINE M. CHAPMAN, L.R.C.P., L.R.C.S. (Edinburgh).

Assistant Medical Electrician, Glasgow Royal Infirmary and
Physician Wynd Dispensary.

Price ½d. ; 1/- for 25 ; 1/11 for 50 ; 3/6 for 100.

LONDON SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE, 58, Victoria Street, S.W.

November, 1908.

Printed and Published by S. SIDERS & Co., 17 & 19, Ball Street, Kensington, W.

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TITLE